

Connie Slaughter

African Americans in the Civil War



1st Kansas Colored Volunteers engaging Confederate forces at Island Mound, MO, October 28, 1862. Courtesy Fort Scott National Historic Site.

“Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pockets, and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States.”

These words, spoken by Frederick Douglass, moved many African Americans to enlist in the Union Army and literally fight for their freedom. With President Abraham Lincoln’s issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, the Civil War became for the Union a war to free the slaves.

Approximately 180,000 African Americans, comprising 163 units served in the Union Army during the Civil War, and many more African Americans served in the Union Navy. Those who joined the war effort ranged from free blacks fighting for their rights to escaped slaves fighting for their freedom.

The Union Army used blacks as laborers and slaves from the beginning of the war. On July 17, 1862, Congress passed two acts allowing the enlistment of African Americans, but official enrollment of blacks into the Union Army occurred only after the September 1862 issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation. Thanks to several Union officers, however, five black regiments were in uniform before the proclamation took effect on January 1, 1863. By the first week of August, 1863, 14 Negro regiments were in the field and ready for service. The general opinion of white soldiers and officers was that black men lacked the courage to fight and fight well. Given the opportunity, however, African Americans silenced their critics with exemplary bravery. One of the first combat experiences for black troops came in October 1862. The soldiers of the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteer Infantry Regiment defeated attacking Confederate forces at the battle of Island Mound, Missouri. At the battle of Port Hudson, Louisiana, May 27, 1863, blacks fought well, advancing over open ground in the face of deadly small arms fire. Although the attack failed, the

black soldiers proved their capability to withstand the heat of battle.

On July 17, 1863, at Honey Springs, Indian Territory, now Oklahoma, the 1st Kansas Colored established its military reputation. Union troops under General James Blunt ran into a strong Confederate force under General Douglas Cooper. After a bloody engagement lasting two hours, Coopers’ soldiers retreated. The 1st Kansas, which held the center of the Union line, advanced within 50 paces of the Confederate line and exchanged fire for some 20 minutes until the Confederate line broke and ran. Critics were silenced in the face of the 1st’s bravery and courage. General Blunt wrote after the battle, “I never saw such fighting as was done by the Negro regiment. ... The question that Negroes will fight is settled; besides, they make better soldiers in every respect than any troops I have ever had under my command.”

The most widely known early battle fought by African Americans was the assault on Fort Wagner, South Carolina, by the 54th Massachusetts on July 18, 1863. The 54th volunteered to lead the assault on the strongly fortified Confederate position. The soldiers of the 54th showed great courage as they charged the stronghold under heavy fire. While the attack failed, the soldiers proved their courage as they were willing to die for their freedom.

The 54th was not the only regiment to face great odds and show such courage. Every time a black soldier faced a Confederate force, he knew that, if captured, he would be killed, but yet he fought on with great courage and skill. At the end of 1863, Christian A. Fleetwood, a Baltimore free African American who had joined the army, expressed the feelings of most black men, as he wrote in his diary, “This year has brought about many changes that at the beginning were or would have been thought impossible. The close of the year finds me a soldier for the cause of my race. May God bless the cause, and enable me in the coming year to forward it on.”

Christian A. Fleetwood, courtesy Richmond National Battlefield Park.

Although black soldiers proved themselves reputable soldiers, discrimination in pay and other areas remained widespread. According to the Militia Act of 1862, soldiers of African descent were to receive \$10.00 a month, \$3.00 of which was to be paid in clothing. A white soldier of the same rank received \$13.00 a month, plus a clothing allowance of \$3.50. Many regiments struggled for equal pay, some refusing any money until, on June 15, 1864, Congress granted equal pay for all black soldiers.

African-American soldiers participated in every major campaign of 1864-1865 except Sherman's invasion of Georgia. The year 1864 was especially eventful for African-American troops. On April 12, 1864, at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest led his forces against the Union-held

fortification, occupied by 292 black and 285 white soldiers. After driving in the Union pickets and giving the garrison an opportunity to surrender, Forrest's men charged and swarmed into the fort with little difficulty. White and black Union sol-

diers surrendered, and African-American soldiers were shot down in cold blood by Rebels who yelled, "No quarter! No quarter!" The Committee on the Conduct of the War concluded that the Confederates were guilty of atrocities which included murdering most of the garrison after it had surrendered, burying black soldiers alive, and setting fire to tents containing Federal wounded. The battle cry for the African-American soldier east of the Mississippi River became "Remember Fort Pillow!"

One of the most heroic, lesser known, engagements involving African Americans was the September 29, 1864 battle of New Market Heights and Fort Gilmer, Virginia. New Market Heights, part of a larger operation planned and directed by Union Major General Benjamin Butler, is also known as Chaffin's Farm. After being pinned down by Confederate artillery and small arms fire for about 30 minutes, the Negro division of the XVIII Corps charged the earthworks and rushed up the slopes of the heights. The division suffered tremendous casualties and they were engaged in battle for just over one hour. For their heroic efforts, 14 African Americans received the Medal of Honor. This is especially significant because only 16 Medals of Honor were awarded to black army troops during the entire Civil War.

In January 1864, a group of Confederate officers in the Army of Tennessee, headed by General Patrick Cleburne, proposed that because the Union was using slaves against the South, the Confederacy should use them as soldiers, too. Cleburne's reports also offered African Americans the option of freedom if they fought and survived.



The National Park Service has made great strides in interpreting the role of African Americans who fought in the Civil War. Specific examples can be found at these four National Park Service areas: Fort Scott National Historic Site, Fort Scott Kansas; Richmond National Battlefield Park, Richmond, Virginia; Petersburg National Battlefield, Petersburg, Virginia; and Vicksburg National Military Park, Vicksburg, Mississippi.

Fort Scott National Historic Site has the distinction of being the site where the 1st and 2nd Kansas (Colored) Volunteer Infantry Regiments were mustered into service. During the Civil War, Kansas was the first Union state to officially recruit and train colored troops. The historic site has an excellent site bulletin entitled *First to Serve* that discusses the service and bravery of the 1st and 2nd Kansas Colored. Richmond National Battlefield Park encompasses the battlefield of New Market Heights where members of the 4th, 5th, 6th,

36th, and 38th United States Colored Troops fought gallantly. Of the 16 African-American Medal of Honor recipients, 14 received the medal for their bravery at the Battle of New Market Heights. The park has photographs of several of the recipients as well as appropriate exhibits.

Petersburg National Battlefield also has a site bulletin on the African American involvement entitled *African Americans at Petersburg*. This bulletin is very popular with visitors, and the City of Petersburg also distributes the bulletin at various locations. The living history program at Petersburg also interprets the role of African Americans. At their Union encampment, one or two United States Colored Troop units are in attendance to educate and instruct the visitor. Vicksburg National Military Park has recently included the role of the African American in their wayside exhibits. These waysides interpret the digging of Grant's Canal and the Battle of Miliken's Bend in Louisiana. They also have a living history program available upon request.

Confederate President Jefferson Davis refused to consider Cleburne's proposal and forbade discussion of the idea. The concept, however, did not die. By the fall of 1864, the South was losing more and more ground, and some believed the only way to avoid defeat was to arm the slaves. On March 13, the Confederate Congress passed General Order 14, and President Davis signed the order into law. The order was issued March 23, 1865, but only a few companies were raised and the war ended before they could be used in battle.

In actual numbers, African-American soldiers made up an estimated 9–10% of the Union Army. Losses among African Americans were high, and from all reported casualties, approximately one fifth of all African Americans enrolled in the military lost their lives during the Civil War. Black soldiers did not have a high desertion rate despite the discrimination in pay and duty, the threat of death or return to slavery if captured, and the ravages of battle.

African-American soldiers overcame the tremendous odds against them and made an important and valuable contribution to the Civil War. They fought for their freedom with courage and bravery. A government commission which investigated the condition of the freedman, in May 1864, summed up the impact African Americans had on the Civil War. "The whites have changed, and are still rapidly changing, their opinion of the Negro. And the Negro, in his new condition as a freedman, is himself, to some extent, a changed being. No one circumstance has tended so much to these results as the display of manhood in Negro soldiers. Though there are higher qualities than strength and physical courage, in our present state of civilization there are no qualities which command from the masses more respect."

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John Peterson and Ida Jones

Civil War Soldiers and Sailors Project

The Civil War Soldiers and Sailors (CWSS) project is a cooperative effort by the National Park Service and several other public and private organizations to computerize information about the Civil War. The goal of the CWSS is to increase the American people's understanding of this decisive era in American history by making information about it widely accessible. The CWSS will enable members of the public to make a personal link between themselves and history, fostering an appreciation of history that is crucial to gaining support for preserving historic sites. The CWSS will also further the development of innovative educational and research tools.

The National Park Service's Information and Telecommunications Center (ITC) is managing the overall CWSS project, working with a number of cooperating organizations. Two activities which are part of the CWSS project which relate to African-American history are described below.

U.S. Colored Troops Data Entry

One of the first uses of the CWSS data will be for the African-American Civil War Memorial in the Shaw neighborhood in the District of Columbia. The memorial is scheduled to be dedi-

cated by President Clinton in 1996 and will be managed by NPS. The approximately 185,000 names of soldiers who served in the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) have been given first priority for data entry in the CWSS Names Index project, managed by the Federation of Genealogical Societies. Nationwide there are 27 states and the District of Columbia working on data entry. Information on the status of the CWSS and how to volunteer can be found on the CWSS homepage, the url is <http://www.cr.nps.gov/itd/welcome.html>. A group in Washington, DC, organized by Lyndia Grant in Council member Frank Smith's office, has sent in a large number of names. The Genealogical Society of Utah (Mormon Church) is editing and processing the names in partnership with NPS.

Howard University Research on African American Civil War Sailors

As part of the CWSS Project, the NPS has established a cooperative agreement with Howard University. Under this agreement, the History Department at Howard is conducting research to identify African-American sailors who served during the Civil War. Funding is provided by Department of Defense Legacy funds. Identification of African-American sailors requires